2: Swanton E-5 (1911-12) 1928 NNU Creek NNU

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND MEDICAL PRACTICES OF THE CREEK INDIANS

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GENERAL REMARKS

114 771 The southern Indians, like other peoples, dealt not only with their environment as it was but with their environment as they conceived it to be, and one of the most important branches of ethnology is that which concerns this latter concept. Unfortunately, at the present day comparatively little may be gathered regarding their attitude on the broader aspects of belief that is free from suspicion of white influence, while on the other hand no early traveler among the Indians was sufficiently interested in them and sufficiently sympathetic to obtain and transmit a correct account of it. The writer who most nearly filled these requirements was the trader Adair so often quoted in previous papers, but unfortunately his assistance on this particular side of aboriginal life is seriously injured by a prepossession that the Indians were descendants of "the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel," and he read this prepossession into all of the religious activities of the people observed by him. Particularly he concluded that the meaningless vocalic sounds used by his red friends in songs were so many forms of the name Jehovah and that their repetition was a conscious or subconscious adoration of the Hebrew deity. Nevertheless he was an acute and honest observer and faithful recorder of the things he actually heard and saw, so that it is usually possible to separate the facts from his deductions. With his help, the little that is furnished us by other writers, the information that I have myself been able to collect, and that obtainable from native myths and legends, the following outline of Creek religious beliefs has been put together.

THE COSMOS

772 Like all other primitive peoples, the southeastern Indians conceived of the earth as a flat plane overarched by a solid vault. To General Hitchcock Tukabahchee miko expressed the opinion that the world is square. Eakins, whose information comes principally from an Alabama Indian, says "they generally entertain the belief that the earth is a square figure, and entirely surrounded by water; and by going to the verge of the plain, they could step off."[1] And, in another

[1] Schoolcraft, Ind. Tribes, vol. i, p. 269.

2: Swanton E-5 (1911-12) 1928 NN11 Creek NN11

772 place he observes "they believe the sky to be a material mass of some kind" and "that it is of a half-circular form, but that its truncations do not touch the earth."[1] The vault or sky was supposed to rise and fall upon the earth at intervals so that, by watching his opportunity, a person could pass under its edge. According to the same authority and my native informant, Jackson Lewis, the old people believed that the stars were stuck upon the under side of the sky, some of them, along with the sun and moon, revolving around the earth.[2] The constellation of the Great Dipper was called Pĭlo hagi, "the image of a canoe." The North Star was known as Kolasniegu, "the stationary star," the Morning Star as Hayátitca, "bringer of daylight," and the Pleiades as Tukábofká.[3] A few other constellations and stars were also named.[4] Meteors were supposed to be "excrement cast upon the earth," and they mixed what they took for this with their medicines.[5]

Comets were thought to portend war. Some Natchez and Cherokee beliefs regarding them may here be inserted. In the language of the former a comet was called an'c tsū'ná, "chief of war"; it was believed to portend trouble for the whole people and a short life for the chief, or for the white men's President. The Cherokee are said to have called it "the big lion"; with them it was also a sign of war. The following story of a comet well illustrates the belief regarding such bodies and incidentally shows the small value of information when it comes from the superstitious. Watt Sam was my chief Natchez informant.

"Thirty one or thirty two years ago [from 1912] Watt Sam's grandmother, his brother, his sister, and Nancy Taylor, all of whom except the last are dead, had the following very singular experience. They lived close to Twin Springs, a mile to three-quarters of a mile north of where Watt Sam now lives. They were going to the cow lot a little after dark to turn the cows out when they heard a noise wi'dzidzidzidziti, and, looking up, they saw a snake chasing the moon. They were so frightened that they ran back to the house without letting the cows out. The snake chased the moon to a point half way between the zenith and the western horizon and stopped. Then it began moving its head back and forth, and they could see something green that looked like a snake's tongue. Its body extended half way across the sky, the tail being pointed toward the east. They could see something at the end of its tail which looked like rattles four feet long and a foot wide. The markings were like those of a diamond-backed rattlesnake. Its head was

[1] Schoolcraft, Ind. Tribes, vol. i, p. 269.

[2] Loughridge and Hodge have tenk-lofka.—English and Muskokee Dictionary.

[3] From the Natchez I heard of a right-angled constellation which they called dū'gŭl gonō'gop, "the elbow stars." A tailed star, probably a meteor, was known as a "smoke star" (dū'gŭl bu'p'guble).

[4] Schoolcraft, op. cit.

2: Swanton E-5 (1911-12) 1928 NN11 Creek NN11

772

about four feet broad. They walked out into the yard and looked at it while the snake and moon remained still. Then they got frightened and went into the house, and the three children went to sleep. Their grandmother, however, was in distress, and did not know what to do. She went to the door every little while to look at the snake. By and by she got sleepy and fell into a doze. Then she awoke, went to the door, and looked again. She could not see it very plainly because it had grown dim. Then she went to bed again and slept a very long time, and when she looked once more she could see nothing of the snake and the moon had gone back to the east, to the place from which it had started. Watt was at Muskogee at that time with his mother. He has asked a number of people but never learned of anyone else who had seen this snake. At the time when this happened Creek Samy, an old Cherokee Indian, was out in the yard of his house with some other Indians playing cards. They did not see it either, but when they heard about it they said it was a lion that had flown across the sky. They claimed that a lion flew across the sky twenty or twenty-five years before that."

The galaxy was called poya fik-tcâlk innini, "the spirits' road."[7] The aurora borealis was supposed to indicate changes in the weather "and always for the worse."[8]

The sun and moon were considered the abodes of powerful beings, or at least as connected with such beings; the former was evidently associated with the chief deity of the southern Indians to be considered below. Tukabahchee Emiko quoted the old people to the effect that the sun must be a great way off, "for if it came near it would burn everything up." When the sun or moon was eclipsed they said that a great toad (sâbâkti) was about to swallow it, and in order to help drive it away they discharged their guns at it and shot at it with arrows until they "hit" it. Instead of a toad, Eakins was told of a "big dog," representing perhaps a distinctively Alabama idea.[9] My own informants asserted that the moon was not shot at when eclipsed, but this is an error. Tuggle adds his testimony to what has been given and on the occasion of a total eclipse of the moon, October 22, 1790, Caleb Swan says: "The Indians in all the surrounding [Creek] villages are yelling with fear, and firing guns in all directions. They have an opinion, on those occasions, that a frog is swallowing the moon; and make all their most hideous noises to frighten it away."[10] Adair tells us that the Indians of his acquaintance rejoiced at the appearance of the new moon[11] from which

[7] It was known to the Natchez as wicgup ñ'ic, "dog trail," because it is supposed to have owed its origin to a dog who dragged a sack of flour along it, spilling the flour as he went, but this is also a Cherokee story (Mooney, Cherokee Myths, p. 259). A Cherokee informant added that his people sometimes said that the dog caused this whiteness from having gotten his paws into mortar.

[8] Eakins in Schoolcraft, Ind. Tribes, vol. I, p. 289.

[9] Schoolcraft, Ind. Tribes, vol. V, p. 289.

[10] Ibid. p. 254.

[11] Adair, Hist. Am. Inds., p. 76; see also Bartram, Travels, p. 496.

2: Swanton E-5 (1911-12) 1928 NN11 Creek NN11

772 it is probable that they considered its waxing and waning either as a successive birth and death of entirely distinct bodies or as a wasting away and regrowth of one and the same. Another idea is suggested by Bartram in a footnote: "I have observed the young fellows very merry and jocose, at the appearance of the new moon, saying, how ashamed she looks under the veil, since sleeping with the sun these two or three nights, she is ashamed to show her face, &c." [12] In this connection might be quoted a speech which Pope states was delivered by an old doctor to the Coweta, Kasihta, and Broken Arrow people, after a very wet season, in which he says that the moon "had covered her face with a bear-skin" and concealed the stars with the tails of numerous beaver.[13] These declarations sound genuine though there is abundant evidence of "reading in" in parts of this speech. The moon was supposed to be inhabited by a man and a dog. Eakins, who makes this statement, also refers to a native idea that it is "a hot substance." [14] This smacks of white acculturation.

The rainbow was believed to be a great snake called Oskin-tatcà, "cutter off of the rain," its connection with clearing weather being well understood. "The old people knew," says Tuggle, "when they saw 'O-cee-kee-eer-tah-cher' that the rain would stop and that enough rain would never fall to drown the earth." He adds the important information that the rainbow cut off the rain by resting its two ends "on great springs of water." The Natchez call it et gwàht, "house neck." People spoke of running past it.

They believed in inhabited worlds—i. e., planes, both below and above that on which we dwell. Tuggle says:

"The earth is a very small island. . . . Indians live [on this and] also in the world under the earth. The third world is the sky world. The people of 'Esar-kee-tum-me-see' the Source of Life, the Life Controller, live in the sky world.

"Some say people (Indians) came down from the sky world, others say that they sprang from the earth, the soil, and hence the earth is man's mother and therefore sacred, and man cannot sell his own mother."

Tukabahchee miko told General Hitchcock that there are people living in the water and under the ground as well as upon the ground, and that the old people told him they had heard the drum [to accompany their dances].[15] Eakins heard of a succession of inhabited planes underneath ours.[16] On the other hand no one seems to have 773 mentioned a belief in more than one world above. This world above was thought to be the realm of departed souls as well as the dwelling place of many supernatural beings. The latter were considered benef-

[12] Bartram, Travels, p. 496.
[13] Pope, Tour, p. 61.
[14] Schoolcraft, op. cit.
[15] Hitchcock, Ms. notes.
[16] Eakins in Schoolcraft, Ind. Tribes, vol. 1, p. 269.